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TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

We have already had very frequent occasion to point out examples of the abuse of certain words, diverted from their true meaning, which is one of the symptoms of the intellectual confusion of our time, so that we would almost be tempted to excuse ourselves for returning once more to a subject relating to considerations of this order. Yet there are ambiguities that cannot be dissipated at a single stroke, but only by insistence; and, on the point that presently concerns us, this has become more necessary than ever in current circumstances, in order to forestall any attempt at illegitimate use of the very idea of “tradition” by those who would like unduly to assimilate what it implies to their own conceptions in some domain or another. It must moreover be clearly understood that it is not a question here of suspecting the good faith of one person or another, for in many cases there may quite simply be nothing more than pure misunderstanding; the ignorance of the majority of our contemporaries with regard to everything that possesses a genuinely traditional character is so complete that there is not even cause for astonishment. But at the same time one is forced to recognize that these errors of interpretation and these involuntary misunderstandings serve certain “plans” far too well for it not to be permissible to ask whether their increasing diffusion might not be due to some of those “suggestions” that dominate the modern mentality and that, precisely, always tend at bottom toward the destruction of everything that is tradition in the true sense of the word.

Let us explain ourselves more fully on this point: the modern mentality itself, in everything that specifically characterizes it as such, is in sum only the product of a vast collective suggestion which, exercised continually over the course of several centuries, has determined the formation and progressive development of the anti-traditional spirit, in

which, in the final analysis, the entire ensemble of the distinctive traits of this mentality is summed up. We do not have to ask ourselves here whether what thus appears as an anomaly, and even as a veritable monstrosity, does not nevertheless find its place within a more general order, or, in other terms, whether, by virtue of the very “cyclical laws” to which we have often alluded, such a deviation did not have to occur inevitably at this period; that is a completely different aspect of the question. What we have in view at present is only the “technique” by which this deviation could in fact have been brought about, and it is this “technique” that can be described as accurately as possible by defining it as a kind of collective suggestion. But however powerful and however skillful this suggestion may be, there can come a moment when the state of disorder and imbalance that results from it becomes so apparent that certain people can no longer fail to notice it, and then there is a risk that a “reaction” will arise that compromises this very result; it seems indeed that today things have reached precisely this point, and it is here that what we could call the “counterfeit” of the traditional idea intervenes effectively, in order to divert this “reaction” from the goal toward which it tends.

If this “counterfeit” is possible, it is because of the ignorance of which we spoke above: the very idea of tradition has been destroyed to such an extent, in the modern Western world, that those who aspire to rediscover it scarcely know in which direction to turn, and that they are only too ready to accept the false ideas that will be presented to them in its place and under its name. These people have realized, at least to a certain degree, that they had been deceived by openly anti-traditional suggestions, and that the beliefs that had thus been imposed upon them represented only error and disappointment; that is assuredly something in the sense of the “reaction” of which we have just spoken, but, in sum, it is still entirely negative. One becomes well aware of this by reading writings, increasingly numerous, in which one finds the most just criticisms with regard to present-day “civilization,” but in which the means envisaged for remedying the evils thus denounced have a strangely disproportionate and insignificant character, childish even in a way: “scholastic” or “academic” projects, one might say, but nothing

more, and above all nothing that testifies to the least knowledge of a profound order. It is at this stage that the effort, however laudable and meritorious it may be, can easily allow itself to be diverted toward “activities” which, in their own way and despite certain appearances, will only contribute in the end to increasing still further the disorder and confusion of this “civilization” whose correction they are supposed to bring about.

Those of whom we have just spoken are those whom one may call “traditionalists,” when one takes this word in its legitimate sense; in fact, it can properly indicate only a simple tendency, a kind of aspiration toward tradition, without any real knowledge of it; and one can measure by this the entire distance that separates the “traditionalist” spirit from the true traditional spirit, which on the contrary essentially implies such knowledge. The “traditionalist” is and can only be a “seeker,” and that is precisely why he is always in danger of going astray, not being in possession of the principles that alone would give him an infallible direction; and this danger will naturally be all the greater insofar as he will encounter along his path, like so many snares, all those false ideas brought forth by the power of illusion, which has a capital interest in preventing him from reaching the true goal of his search.

Indeed, it is evident that this power can maintain itself and continue to exercise its action only on the condition that any restoration of the traditional idea be rendered impossible; it is therefore just as important for it to deflect researches tending toward traditional knowledge as, on the other hand, those that, bearing upon the origins and the real causes of the modern deviation, would be capable of revealing something of its own nature and of its means of influence. There are here, for it, two necessities in a way complementary to one another, and which one could even regard, at bottom, as the positive and negative aspects of a single fundamental requirement of its domination.

All abusive uses of the word “tradition” can, to one degree or another, serve this end, beginning with the most vulgar of all, that which makes it synonymous with “custom” or “usage,” thereby bringing about a

confusion of tradition with the most basely human things and those most completely devoid of any profound meaning. But there are other deformations that are more subtle and thereby more dangerous; all of them moreover have as their common characteristic that of lowering the idea of tradition to a purely human level, whereas, as we have often explained, there is nothing truly traditional except what implies an element of a supra-human order. This is the essential point, that which constitutes, in a way, the very definition of tradition and of everything that is connected with it; and it is also, of course, what must at all costs be prevented from being recognized in order to maintain the modern mentality in its illusions. One has only to see how those who claim to make themselves the “historians” of religions and of other traditional forms are above all bent on explaining them by exclusively human factors; it matters little whether, according to schools, these factors are psychological, social, or others, and even the multiplicity of explanations thus presented makes it easier to seduce a greater number. What is constant is the resolute will to reduce everything to the human and to allow nothing to subsist that surpasses it; and those who believe in the value of this destructive “criticism” are from then on entirely disposed to confuse tradition with anything whatsoever, since there is indeed nothing left, in the idea that has been inculcated in them, that could truly distinguish it from what is devoid of all traditional character.

Since everything that is of a purely human order cannot, for that very reason, be legitimately qualified as traditional, there cannot be, for example, any “philosophical tradition” or any “scientific tradition” in the modern and profane sense of that word; and, of course, there cannot be any “political tradition” either, at least where any truly traditional social organization is lacking, which is the case in the present Western world. Yet these are among the expressions that are commonly employed today and that constitute so many denaturations of the idea of tradition; and it goes without saying that, if the “traditionalist” minds of which we spoke earlier can be led to allow their activity to be diverted toward one or another of these essentially contingent domains and to limit all their efforts to them, their aspirations will thus be “neutralized” and rendered perfectly harmless, if they are not sometimes even used,

unbeknownst to them, in a sense entirely opposed to their intentions.

It even happens that one goes so far as to apply the name “tradition” to things that, by their very nature, are clearly anti-traditional: thus one speaks of a “humanist tradition,” or again of a “national tradition,” whereas “humanism,” as its very name indicates moreover, is nothing other than that negation of the supra-human which is at the root of the modern spirit in all its forms, and whereas the constitution of “nationalities” was the means employed to destroy the traditional social organization of the Middle Ages. There would therefore be no cause for astonishment, under these conditions, if one were someday to come to speak just as well of a “Protestant tradition,” or even of a “secular tradition” or a “revolutionary tradition”! At the degree of mental confusion to which the great majority of our contemporaries have arrived, the most manifestly contradictory associations of words no longer have anything that could frighten them, or even simply give them pause for reflection.

This leads us directly to another important remark: when certain people, having perceived the modern disorder by noting the all-too-visible degree to which it has now reached, wish to “react,” is not the best means of rendering this need for “reaction” ineffective to orient it toward one of the earlier and less “advanced” stages of the same deviation, where this disorder had not yet become so apparent and presented itself, so to speak, under aspects more acceptable to those who have not been completely blinded by certain suggestions? It is not sufficient to declare oneself sincerely “anti-modern,” as every “traditionalist” in intention must normally do, if one is still oneself affected by modern ideas under some form more or less attenuated and thereby no doubt more difficult to discern, but corresponding always in fact to one or another of the stages that these ideas have traversed in the course of their development; no “concession,” even involuntary or unconscious, is possible here, for from their point of departure to their present outcome everything is linked together and connected inexorably.

And in this regard we shall add yet this: the work whose aim is to

prevent the “reaction” from aiming further than a return to a lesser disorder, while moreover concealing the character of that disorder and making it pass for “order,” coincides exactly with that which is accomplished, on the other hand, to make the modern spirit penetrate into the very interior of what may subsist, in the West, of traditional organizations of every order; the same effect of “neutralization” of forces whose opposition might be feared is equally obtained in both cases. It is not even enough to speak of “neutralization,” for from the struggle that will inevitably occur between elements that are thus brought, so to speak, back to the same level, and whose hostility therefore represents, at bottom, only that which can exist between diverse and apparently contrary productions of the modern deviation, there can finally emerge only a new increase of disorder and confusion.

Among all the more or less incoherent things that are presently agitated and collide, among all the external “movements” of whatever kind they may be, there is therefore absolutely nothing, from the traditional or even simply “traditionalist” point of view, in which one should “take sides,” according to the commonly employed expression; for that would be to allow oneself to be duped, and, the same influences in reality being exercised behind all of this, it would be properly to play their game to involve oneself in struggles desired and invisibly directed by them. The mere fact of “taking sides” under these conditions would therefore already constitute in the end, however unconsciously it might be, a truly anti-traditional attitude.

We do not wish to make here any particular application, which would in sum be of little use after all that we have already said, and would moreover be entirely out of place; it appears to us only necessary, in order to put a stop to the pretensions of all false “traditionalism,” to specify that notably no political tendency existing in present-day Europe can validly recommend itself by the authority of traditional ideas or doctrines, principles being equally lacking everywhere, although assuredly one has never spoken so much of “principles” as one does today on all sides, applying this designation almost indiscriminately to everything that merits it least, and sometimes even to what on the

contrary implies the negation of all true principle.

Under this other abuse of a word, we moreover again find this character of “counterfeit” that we have already observed, in a general way, with regard to the traditional idea, and which appears to us to constitute by itself a “mark” sufficiently important and sufficiently significant that it is not without interest to insist upon it more particularly in a forthcoming article, which will at the same time provide us with the opportunity to put the “traditionalists” even more explicitly on guard against some of the multiple dangers of deviation to which their efforts are exposed.

For the moment, there remains for us still, because of certain malevolent or ill-intentioned persons whom we know all too well, to take a precaution that should normally be entirely superfluous: namely, to declare expressly that what we have just said in the last place cannot in any way or to any degree be regarded as constituting, on our part, a sort of more or less disguised incursion into the domain of politics; it is, on the contrary, the very expression of one of the principal reasons for which we intend to remain absolutely foreign to everything that touches upon that domain. We wish to say nothing more or other than what we say; what we wish to say, we have the habit of saying clearly, perhaps even too clearly for the taste of some; and no one has the right to claim to see in it the slightest “hidden meaning,” nor to add to it, by attributing them to us, his own interpretations more or less tendentious.

SYMBOLIC WEAPONS

In our article on Symbolic Flowers¹ we were led to make reference to the lance which, in the legend of the Grail, appears as a symbol complementary to the cup, and which is one of the numerous figures of the “Axis of the World”². At the same time, this lance is also, we said, a symbol of the “Celestial Ray,” and, according to the considerations that we have developed elsewhere³, it is evident that these two meanings coincide at bottom; but this also explains that the lance, as well as the sword and the arrow which are in sum its equivalents, is sometimes assimilated to the solar ray. It is well understood that the polar and solar symbolisms must never be confused, and that, as we have often indicated, the former has a more fundamental and truly “primordial” character; but it is nonetheless true that what one might call the “transfers” from one to the other constitute a frequent fact, and one that is not without reasons that we shall perhaps seek to explain more clearly on some other occasion. For the moment, we shall confine ourselves to mentioning more particularly, in this regard, the attribution of the arrow to Apollo: it is known that, notably, it is with his arrows that he kills the serpent Python, just as, in the Vedic tradition, Indra kills Ahi or Vritra, the counterpart of Python, with the vajra which represents lightning; and this comparison leaves no doubt as to the original symbolic equivalence of the two weapons in question. We shall also recall the “golden arrow” of Abaris or of Zalmoxis, of which mention is made in the history of Pythagoras; and here one sees even more clearly that this symbolism refers expressly to Hyperborean Apollo, which precisely establishes the link between his solar aspect and his polar aspect⁴.

1 See the April 1936 issue.

2 In this respect, the complementarity of the lance and the cup is strictly comparable to that of the mountain and the cave, on which we shall no doubt return one day.

3 See *The Symbolism of the Cross*.

4 We note in passing, in this regard, that the “golden thigh” of Pythagoras, which makes him appear in a way as a manifestation of Hyperborean Apollo himself, relates to the symbolism of the polar mountain and to that of the Great Bear. On the other hand, the serpent Python is in special connection with Delphi, formerly called Pytho, sanctuary of Hyperborean Apollo; hence the designation of the Pythia, and also the very name of Pythagoras, which is in reality a name of Apollo, “he who leads the Pythia,” that is to say, the inspirer of her oracles.

If we return to the consideration of the various weapons as representing the “Axis of the World,” an important remark imposes itself: namely, that these weapons are, not always, but at least very often, either double-edged or with two opposed points. This latter case, which is more particularly that of the vajra, to which we shall have to return, must manifestly be related to the duality of the poles, considered as the two extremities of the axis, with all the correspondences that it implies and that we have already indicated in a previous article⁵. As for double-edged weapons, since the duality is there marked in the very direction of the axis, one must see in them a more direct allusion to the two currents that are represented elsewhere by the two serpents coiled around the staff or the caduceus; but since these two inverse currents are themselves respectively in relation with the two poles and the two hemispheres, one sees immediately from this that the two symbolisms in reality coincide. At bottom, it is always a matter of a double force, of a single essence in itself, but of apparently opposed effects in its manifestation, as a result of the “polarization” that conditions this manifestation, just as it conditions, moreover, at different levels, all the degrees and all the modes of universal manifestation⁶.

The sword may itself be regarded, in a general way, as a double-edged weapon⁷; but an even more striking example is that of the double axe, which belongs notably to Aegean and Cretan symbolism, that is to say pre-Hellenic, but which is not exclusively proper to it. Now the axe, as we have explained elsewhere⁸, is very especially a symbol of lightning, and thus, in this respect, a strict equivalent of the vajra; and the comparison of these two weapons thus clearly shows the fundamental identity of the two forms of symbolism that we have mentioned, that of

5 The Double Spiral (May 1936).

6 This amounts to saying that all cosmic dualities are in reality only various “specifications” of the primordial duality of Purusha and Prakriti, or, in other terms, of the polarization of Being into “essence” and “substance.”

7 In another of its meanings, the sword is a symbol of the Word or of Speech with its double creative and destructive power (see for example Apocalypse I, 16 and XIX, 15); it is moreover evident that this double power is analogous to the double force of which we have just spoken, or, more exactly still, that these are only different applications of one and the same thing. With regard to the sword, let us also note that, according to certain ancient historians, the Scythians represented the Divinity by a sword planted in the ground at the summit of a mound; the latter being a reduced image of the mountain, one finds here united two of the symbols of the “Axis of the World.”

8 Thunderstones (May 1929).

double-edged weapons and that of weapons with two points⁹.

The representations of the vajra offer multiple variants; Mr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has pointed out¹⁰ that the most usual form, presenting a triple point at each of its extremities, is thereby closely related to the trishūla or trident, another very important symbolic weapon, but the special study of which would take us too far from our subject; we shall merely note that, whereas the median point is the termination of the axis itself, the two lateral points can again be related to the currents of right and left of which we have spoken, and that, for this very reason, a similar triplicity is found elsewhere in “axial” symbolism, for example in certain figurations of the “World Tree”¹¹.

Mr. Coomaraswamy has also shown that the vajra is traditionally assimilated to other known symbols of the “Axis of the World,” such as the axle of the chariot, whose two wheels correspond to Heaven and Earth, which moreover explains in particular certain representations of the vajra as “supported” by a lotus upon which it is placed vertically. As for the quadruple vajra, formed by the union of two ordinary vajras arranged in the form of a cross, if one considers it as placed in a horizontal plane, which is suggested by its designation as karma-vajra, it is very close to symbols such as the swastika and the chakra¹²; we shall content ourselves with noting here these various indications, to which we shall perhaps have occasion to return in other studies, for this subject is one of those that one could not claim to exhaust.

The vajra, besides the meaning of “lightning,” also has at the same time that of “diamond,” which immediately evokes the ideas of indivisibility,

9 The mallet or hammer of Thor, another symbol of lightning that we also noted in the same article, presents, by its T-shaped form, an exact similarity with the double axe. — We shall also remark that, like the mallet and the sword, although less conspicuously than these, the axe is still found today in Masonic symbolism.

10 *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*

11 In this case, the double triplicity of the branches and the roots recalls even more exactly that of the two extremities of the vajra. — It is known moreover that, as an attribute of Shiva, the trishūla is often related to “triple time” (trikāla), that is to say to the three modalities of time as past, present, and future; there would here again be comparisons to be made with what is found in this regard in other traditions, for example with certain aspects of the symbolism of Janus.

12 It is therefore no longer a question here of the vertical axis as previously, but of the two horizontal axes of the geometric representation that we expounded in *The Symbolism of the Cross*

inalterability, and immutability; and, in fact, immutability is indeed the essential character of the axis around which the revolution of all things is effected, and which itself does not participate in it. In this regard, there is yet another very remarkable comparison: Plato describes precisely the “Axis of the World” as a luminous axis of diamond; this axis is surrounded by several concentric sheaths, of diverse dimensions and colors, corresponding to the different planetary spheres, and moving around it¹³. On the other hand, the Buddhist symbolism of the “diamond throne,” situated at the foot of the “Tree of Wisdom” and at the very center of the “Wheel of the World,” that is to say at the unique point that always remains immobile, is no less significant under the same aspect.

To return to lightning, it is considered, as we have indicated elsewhere¹⁴, as representing a double power of production and destruction; one may say, if one wishes, a power of life and death, but, if one were to understand it solely in the literal sense, this would still be only a particular application of what is in reality at issue¹⁵. In fact, it is the force that produces all “condensations” and “dissipations,” which Far-Eastern tradition relates to the alternating action of the two complementary principles yin and yang, and which likewise correspond to the two phases of universal “expiration” and “aspiration”¹⁶; this is what Hermetic doctrine, for its part, calls “coagulation” and “solution”¹⁷; and the double action of this force is symbolized by the two opposed extremities of the vajra, insofar as it is a “fulgurant” weapon, while the diamond clearly represents its unique and indivisible essence.

We shall note incidentally, by way of curiosity, since this can scarcely be more than that from our point of view, an application of a very inferior order, but which is directly connected with the question of

13 Republic, Book X (Myth of Er the Armenian). — This ensemble of sheaths constitutes the “Spindle of Necessity”; the Fate Clotho causes it to turn.

14 See our article already mentioned on Thunderstones.

15 In connection with our earlier remarks about the respective weapons of Apollo and Indra, it may be noted that like the thunderbolt, the solar ray is also considered as vivifying or deadly as the case may be. Let us also recall that the lance of the Grail legend as well as the lance of Achilles, to which we have already compared it in this connection, had the double power of inflicting wounds and of healing them.

16 See our article The Double Spiral (May 1936).

17 It is also what the ancient Greek philosophers termed ‘generation’ and ‘corruption’.

symbolic weapons: the “power of points,” well known in magic and even in profane physics, really relates to “solution,” that is to say to the second aspect of the double power of which we have just spoken. On the other hand, a correspondence of the first aspect, or of “coagulation,” is found in the magical use of knots or “bindings”; we shall also recall in this regard the symbolism of the “Gordian knot,” which Alexander moreover cuts with his sword, which is again quite significant; but here another question appears, that of the “vital knot,” which, although in analogical relation with the preceding, goes far beyond the domain and the scope of simple magic¹⁸.

Finally, we must mention another “axial” symbol, which is not a weapon properly speaking, but which is nevertheless assimilated to one by its form terminating in a point: this symbol is that of the nail; and among the Romans, the nail (*clavus*) and the key (*clavis*), which their language brought together in a rather singular manner, were both related to the symbolism of Janus¹⁹. With the key, which is also an “axial” symbol, we would be led to other considerations into which we do not wish to enter at present; we shall only say that the “power of the keys,” or the double power of “binding” and “loosing”²⁰, is not truly different from that of which we have spoken: at bottom, it is always a matter of “coagulation” and “solution,” in the Hermetic sense of these two terms, that is in reality involved.

18 We made allusion to this question, with regard to the “sensitive point” of cathedrals, in a note entitled *Cologne or Strasbourg?* (January 1927).

19 We shall also recall, to complete the remark we have just made, the magical power attributed to each of these two objects, which, apart from any question of “phenomenological” order, appears as a sort of exoteric degeneration of their traditional meaning.

20 One may remark that these words themselves also have an evident relation with the symbolism of bindings or knots; all this is therefore very closely connected, and the various forms assumed by symbolism are always perfectly coherent among themselves.